

## *Associated Press*

### **Valley Needing Legal Services**

McALLEN (AP) - The consolidation of legal services agencies for the poor may improve efficiency, but won't increase the number of clients served, a rural legal specialist in South Texas says.

David Hall, director of Texas Rural Legal Aid in Weslaco, said legal services for the poor in the Rio Grande Valley are inadequate and need a dramatic increase in funding.

"We've got one lawyer for every 30,000 poor people in the Valley," Hall said in Sunday's editions of The Monitor (McAllen).

As part of a nationwide overhaul of Legal Services Corp. to get more poor people legal help, nine legal aid groups in Texas are being folded into three, creating mega-programs involving dozens of counties across thousands of miles.

John McKay, president of the organization, said the refocused and larger programs can raise more money, find more lawyers and increase the number of poor people who get help through the civil courts system.

The programs, supplemented by funding from state governments, bar associations and foundations, provide free legal help to the poor but not in criminal cases.

But Hall said what's needed is more money. He said his group takes on about 10,000 cases per year with a staff of eight or nine attorneys.

Of the \$329 million appropriated by Congress to Legal Services Corp. this year, the Valley receives about \$15 million to \$20 million and employs about 37 staff lawyers. Organizations that provide free or "pro bono" services are able to maintain a better lawyer-to-client ratio because they often specialize in particular kinds of cases, Hall said. Even accounting for pro bono work, as much as 90 percent of the legal needs of the poor go unmet, according to Bill Underwood, a law professor at Baylor University.

"If every lawyer in the state of Texas was doing pro bono work, then that still wouldn't be enough," he said.

Underwood said one lawyer working full-time for a legal services group can accomplish as much as 20 lawyers doing part-time pro bono work on a similar case.

"The problem is, there's never been adequate public funding," he said.

But Ken Boehm, a former counsel to the LSC board said a lack of funding for the federal LSC program is not the problem, it needs reform